

# 101 TIPS FOR THE SMART STEPMOM

Expert Advice From One  
Stepmom to Another

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BETHANY HOUSE PUBLISHERS

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**To my mother, Roberta:**

*Thank you for working so hard as a  
single-parent mom to provide for Mark and me,  
and for always loving and supporting me.  
I love you.*

**To my grandchildren, Colin and Erin:**

*You are the greatest perk to being a stepmom.  
I'm so grateful that God has given me the gift of—you!  
Always remember, Nana loves you.*

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## Introduction

Being a stepmom is so much more difficult than I thought it would be,” stepmom Sarah shared. “I thought I was ready to take on the task of being a stepmom to my husband’s three kids. But I find myself struggling with so many issues.

“Plus I feel guilty that I’m angry, sad, and frustrated all at the same time,” she continued. “I snap at my husband when things aren’t going well, and I feel like the wicked stepmother. What’s wrong with me?”

If there is one sentence stepmoms across the globe share it’s, “*Being a stepmom is so much harder than I thought it would be.*” As a stepmom of more than twenty-eight years, and after many hours of life coaching, training, and helping other step-families, I totally agree. There are numerous practical reasons why this is true.

During the dating process children are often more accepting of the new woman in their dad’s life. She is viewed as a positive, fun friend that joins them at the zoo and trips for pizza. She brings a female touch to their dad’s space and he smiles more than he did before. Life is better.

However, after a remarriage, their perspective may change, even if the child is an adult. When their dad says “I do,” it’s

common for the kids to perceive his new partner as a threat to their relationship with him. This is when—and why—life in a stepfamily can become complicated, confusing, and chaotic.

Acknowledging and accepting what's normal is the first step toward peace and sanity. It doesn't resolve the issues, but it does neutralize the threat. Couples who pretend that stepfamily issues are the same as those in a first-time marriage are the ones in the most danger of division.

These couples often receive unwise advice from well-meaning friends, marriage experts, or church leadership. Although well-intentioned, if the mentors don't understand how second families are radically different—and extremely more complicated—than first-time families, they can throw gasoline on the fire without realizing it.

To someone with no stepfamily experience, my observations and tips may seem negative. But the woman who understands stepfamily living is nodding her head, saying, "Preach it, sister." Finding someone who can identify is a balm to her weary mind and soul. That's because stepparents—stepmoms in particular—often wear a mantle of shame when they perceive themselves as failing in their role.

When normal stepfamily bumps (okay, occasionally they are mountains) appear, thoughts of anger: "His ex-wife isn't going to dictate our house," or fear: "Will our marriage survive?" or disrespect: "My husband has no backbone when it comes to his kids," or frustration: "Is this ever going to change?" or resentment: "If that's the way it's going to be around here maybe I'll leave," can become deeply rooted.

Take heart, sweet sister stepmom, I have pondered every one of those thoughts myself. And help is on the way.

*101 Tips for the Smart Stepmom* provides insight to help you thrive in a stepfamily. You cannot control the other home. However, you can learn how to recognize and overcome defeating thoughts, lovingly tackle destructive cycles of unhealthy

co-parenting, and address the damaging decisions made by others that threaten your home. It is possible to conquer stepfamily stress with practical tips that can “turn the *Titanic* around.” Together we will build a foundation for a solid stepfamily.

*Please note:* Each stepmom scenario is an actual stepfamily. The names of the stepmoms and stepfamily logistics have been changed to protect their privacy and personal information.

A prayer and Bible references have been added at the end of each chapter for those who desire a deeper spiritual journey.

With a few exceptions, *101 Tips for the Smart Stepmom* avoids duplicating the issues covered in *The Smart Stepmom* coauthored with Ron Deal. Some topics, such as the ex-wife-in-law, are addressed in both books. However, the information is not the same. Although several subjects cross over into both books, if you are seeking extensive in-depth insight on a particular topic such as your own biological child, adding a new baby, discipline, or extensive co-parenting information, *The Smart Stepmom* provides specific guidance on these subjects and more.

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## Why Is It So Complicated?

Your present circumstances don't determine where you can go; they merely determine where you start.

—Nido Qubein

Now what I am commanding you today is not too difficult for you or beyond your reach.

—Moses, recorder of the  
Ten Commandments

A friend and I were discussing his upcoming family vacation. He shared that his two oldest daughters were very excited, but his four-year-old would start to cry when asked if she was looking forward to flying to Michigan. Eventually, the dad asked his daughter what was wrong. She replied, “I don't know how to fly.”

This is a reminder that children hear, perceive, and translate things very differently than adults.

The first step to obtaining a healthy stepfamily is a deeper understanding of how stepfamilies are unique and why children view them differently from their family of origin.

### **Tip #1 Accept That Stepfamilies Are Founded on Loss**

Most couples resist hearing the root reasons why stepfamilies struggle. However, until a stepmom is willing to recognize that all stepfamilies are formed out of loss, she will continually wonder why it's an uphill battle. The refusal to accept this truth can sabotage the relationship. Once a stepmom admits that a death or divorce (or broken relationship) must have occurred for the stepfamily to form, she will begin to comprehend that stepfamilies have unique issues. Understanding this simple principle can go a long way in resolving the multifaceted matters. TV's Dr. Phil McGraw often states, "You can't change what you don't acknowledge."<sup>1</sup> And when it comes to stepfamilies, he couldn't be more accurate.

### **Tip #2 Learn Why and Where the Pain Exists**

Divorce is a death—for everyone. Even if the marriage was abusive or destructive, the entire family must grieve the death of the dream, the covenant, and what "should have been." The brain of a child or teen is not yet fully developed. Therefore, they process grief differently than adults do. Author and adult child of divorce Jen Abbas explains, "At the time of our parents' divorce, we could see the physical breakup of our homes, and while we acutely felt the pain of our parents' partings, we couldn't know then how much more we would miss as we grew to understand all that home was meant to be."<sup>2</sup>

A smart stepmom seeks information, resources, and instruction on how the young mind works and how kids may get stuck

in depression, fear, anger, and guilt. An excellent resource for adults and children is [www.DC4K.org](http://www.DC4K.org). This program provides a plethora of information as well as a support group setting for kids K–5th grade. For those in the teen years, The Landing, a program designed by Saddleback Church, is superb: [www.saddlebackresources.com](http://www.saddlebackresources.com).

### **Tip #3 Embrace What's Normal**

There is an erroneous expectation that when two homes merge it will immediately result in a connection between new family members. Most stepfamily experts agree that it takes approximately seven years for a stepfamily to begin to function as a bonded unit. Disappointment and feelings of failure arise when the couple presumes or demands that the children embrace new faces in the family photo.

Sometimes stepkids who do not immediately accept the new members form a connection as they get older. My brother, Mark, has two children and married a woman with two children. They had full custody of all four children ages six to eleven. They encountered numerous stressful situations in the early years of their marriage, but committed to stay the course. The kids are now in their twenties and thirties, and they sincerely view each other as siblings. The first time I heard my oldest niece, Melissa, refer to her stepbrother, Ian, as her brother, it caught me by surprise. They are living proof that with time, patience, tenacity, and wisdom some stepfamilies are able to merge into one family.

### **Tip #4 Recognize That Each Child Is Different**

A stepmom may have one stepchild who thinks she is the greatest thing since the iPhone and another who wishes she would

disappear. It's totally normal. A few determining factors can be whether they view a stepmom as a benefit or a distraction and how the child relates to the biological mother. For example, a firstborn son may feel it's his job to protect, help, and heal his mom. When a child steps into an adult role to defend or guard the mother, any kindness toward you may feel like a betrayal of her.

Age and gender are two additional factors which may cause one child to desire a relationship and the other to refrain. Teens go through seasons where they don't like any parental influence. And girls tend to perceive a stepmom as more of a threat to their relationship with their dad than boys do.

The answer is to remain available and yet guard your heart at the same time. Love the stepchild who will let you, and keep reaching out with acts of kindness toward the one who won't. It's possible that over time this child will see your good intentions.

If you are working hard to build a bridge, don't take rejection personally. When you struggle to hug the porcupine-like stepchild, reread tips one through three. Then repeat these words: "It's not about me."

## **Tip #5 What to Do When You Feel Outside the Circle**

It's not uncommon for a stepmom to feel outside the family circle. It's as if she is standing in the front yard, peering through the window, as her husband and his kids laugh and play a game together. They are the family. She is the outcast.

The husband doesn't intentionally push her outside, and he rarely perceives the setting as she does. His craving to spend time with his children and create pleasurable moments together may cause him to sacrifice or misunderstand the stepmom's feelings.

Cindi, a stepmom of four years, finally got tired of the isolation and shared with her husband, "I feel like an immature child bringing this up, but when you sit on the couch with your

kids it feels as though you don't want me around. I feel like an intruder on your cozy setting. Fortunately, I've read in stepmom books that this is normal. Can we work on a few intentional ways that I could occasionally be included?"

The solution is for the couple to come up with a plan to draw the stepmom into the circle. Sometimes a secret signal between the husband and wife is necessary. This helps a husband to recognize that his wife is feeling isolated. A smart stepmom doesn't assume or blame a husband for not automatically perceiving that she is hurting. Sometimes a guy needs help connecting the dots.

Keep in mind that if the stepchildren see their dad two days per week or less, it's wise for the stepmom to remember that she sees him every day. He and his children only have a few precious hours together.

### **Tip #6 Encourage Your Hubby to Spend Time With His Kids**

One of the biggest mistakes I made in our early stepfamily formation was not realizing how important it was for my husband to spend time alone with his sons. We immediately began doing everything together as a family. This instigated the feeling that his sons no longer had any time alone with their dad.

I experienced the same situation when I was a child. After my dad remarried a woman with two children, I rarely had any daddy-daughter time with him. Although I didn't hate my first stepmom, I did feel as if I had lost my dad to her and her children. I resented that her two sons got my father full time, and I got the crumbs.

It baffles me that I didn't consider how Steve's sons might feel when I was constantly around. This reveals how self-focused we can become and that sometimes we need others to point out the obvious.

If I had it to do over again I'd nudge my husband to spend more of his visitation time alone with his kids while I enjoyed lunch with my girlfriends.

### **Tip #7 Help Your Hubby Heal**

How much time did your husband take to grieve the death or divorce from his first wife? Did he attend a grief or divorce recovery support group? The answers play a significant role in how ready and equipped your spouse was to enter a remarriage. It's not uncommon for a man to resist attending a support group—there are too many emotions flying around the room.

After twenty-five years in divorce recovery ministry I observed a common mistake after a divorce or death of a spouse. Most people think they are emotionally healed a lot sooner than they actually are. If an individual doesn't get the help necessary to process the various losses, it sets up the next relationship for additional problems. The unhealed person carries the decaying corpse of the last relationship into the next one. And the stench starts to resurface, infecting the new marriage.

It's never too late to get help. Resources such as DivorceCare, GriefShare, or Celebrate Recovery can provide tremendous healing.<sup>3</sup> It's not the wife's job to push a spouse into a recovery setting, but she can gently encourage him to recognize the underlying unresolved issues.

### **Tip #8 Understand That the Ex-Wife Is Here to Stay, Even if She's Gone**

This crucial and potentially flammable subject is so prevalent in the life of a stepmom that I have included an entire chapter on the former spouse. However, I've added a tip here because

I want stepmoms to know I understand how often they are astonished and overwhelmed by issues from the “other home.”

Accepting that there was another woman in the picture before you came along isn't enjoyable. But it is a smart stepmom's crucial step toward peace.

“Sometimes I just want to be the first,” stepmom Elaine cried. “It makes me so sad that my husband has already experienced walking down the aisle, having a baby, buying a home, etc., with another woman. I know I can't change it, but it still makes me mad and frustrated.”

The former spouse may have left good memories behind or a haunting exit. Either way, if the stepmom pretends the first wife didn't exist or tries to eradicate everything associated with her husband's former marriage, it's likely to create problems.

Even if the former spouse is deceased she may still have a substantial effect on the stepfamily home. And her family members are still the aunts, uncles, cousins, and grandparents to your husband's children.

Creating new “firsts” and letting go of the ones you can't reconstruct is a pivotal point.

### **Tip #9 Discover How to Let Go**

Women typically have long memories, especially when they have been wounded. If an offense was inflicted on a stepmom by a hurting stepchild who was lashing out the only way he or she knew how, a new perspective is needed.

For the stepfamily to survive, the stepmom will need to consider these questions: *Why am I holding on to resentment and anger associated with a child's pain? If I choose to cling to this offense rather than letting it go, what will be the end result? Will holding on to this offense help or hurt my marriage? Is there a way I can protect my heart from future pain and forgive*

*my stepchild at the same time? If my own child did something similar, would I be more willing and eager to move forward?*

I am not implying that destructive, disrespectful behavior from the kids or a spouse should be ignored. That is a different issue. I'm referring to a past offense that has been played over and over in the mind and tucked down deep for instant replay. This is an offense that is finished and needs to be forgiven.

### **Tip #10 Release the Guilt**

My guess is that every stepmom has at least one well-meaning aunt, cousin, neighbor, co-worker, friend at church, or mother-in-law who firmly declares that a stepmom should love her husband's children exactly as she would her own. So let me lift that heavy burden of unnecessary shame off the shoulders of stepmoms everywhere. That is ridiculous.

It is very unlikely that a stepmom will have the identical connection to her husband's children as she does the baby who came out of her body, or even one she chose to adopt. When I was recording a radio show with well-respected psychologist Dr. James Dobson, he said to me, "It's unrealistic to believe you will love your husband's child exactly the same way you do your own."

When those who don't understand stepfamily living hear that statement they either scratch their heads attempting to comprehend or point a finger in judgment. However, stepmoms across the globe breathe a sigh of relief. When I get to this section of my Smart Stepmom conferences, the women in the audience often begin crying. I am vocalizing the thoughts that they are too ashamed to speak. And to make it worse, each one believes she is the only one who feels that way. To speak those thoughts out loud feels unloving, unkind, un-Jesus-like, and dare I say—wicked.

To clarify, stating that a stepmom rarely loves a stepchild the exact same way she does her own doesn't mean she is unloving.

It also doesn't give permission for her to be abusive, malicious, dismissive, negligent, or nasty.

It's highly likely that a stepmom will grow to love her stepchild. It's merely a different kind of love. A chosen love. It's a love that may take time, tears, effort, and patience to accomplish. And in many ways that makes it all the more precious.

### **Tip #11 Keep an Eye on Your Own Child**

“My daughter came to me the other day and said that she wishes we would go back to our old house because she misses me,” Carmen, a stressed stepmom, explained. “I have been spending so much time trying to make my stepkids feel at home and doing special things for them, that I didn't notice how my own child was feeling neglected.”

Sometimes the complex issues surrounding the former wife, visitation schedules, and the blending of new family members can cause a stepmom to become so overwhelmed that she isn't aware of the pain her own children may be experiencing.

After the blending, it's wise to keep an eye open to changes in behavior, angry outbursts, crying, isolation, or comments about going to live with Dad. A vital step for every biological parent is to carve out ongoing one-on-one time. Validate your child's role in the family, and don't forget the hugs.

Stepmom expert Heather Hetchler shares,

When I became a full-time stepmom, I assumed my kids were okay because they didn't say anything. However, when my oldest daughter turned eight, she said to me, “Mommy, do you love Andy and his girls more than me?” I was shocked that she would ever think such a thing. I reassured her that my remarriage did not change my love for her in any way. That conversation went a long way in helping to calm her concerns and insecurity, but if she had not spoken up I would never have known she was coping with those fears.<sup>4</sup>

## **Tip #12 Build a Bridge**

Recently during a life coaching session, I encountered a stepmom who had a track record of acting negatively toward her adult stepson and his wife. They perceived her as harsh, critical, and judgmental. The stepmom admitted that her choices weren't wise. However, she proceeded to defend her actions, saying her motives were right, so she wasn't to blame. She offered an apology to the stepson, but unfortunately it was done with a prideful attitude that communicated that he and his wife needed to "get over it."

The tone in her voice revealed that she didn't grasp the gravity of her poor choices. Her decisions and pathetic apology created a gaping chasm between her husband and his son. She was more concerned about defending her position than she was building a bridge. And it was deeply affecting the marriage.

In my opinion this stepmom was clearly wrong. And I told her so. She assumed I would wave a stepmom banner and say her husband should defend his wife's position. But her arrogance and adamant refusal to admit she was wrong, take ownership for the pain she had caused, and do what was necessary to restore the relationship made that impossible.

Marriage only works when each spouse is willing to acknowledge a mistake, attempt to rectify the offense, and then do what is necessary to restore trust.

## **Tip #13 Avoid the "D" Word**

"I used to make comments such as, 'You are lucky I'm still here' and 'Most women in my position might be gone by now' in the midst of a fight," stepmom Holly explained. "My husband finally said, 'Don't ever say something like that again unless you are prepared to leave. I can't take the what ifs.' At that moment God

convicted me and revealed that I was wanting the pain to end, not my marriage. I then understood that I was doing serious damage to my husband and my marriage by making empty threats.”

When a marriage is constantly threatened by divorce, the trust and the bond between husband and wife breaks down. I advise couples to make a vow together that the word *divorce* is forbidden. If your spouse refuses to make this commitment, be the first to set the example. The only tongue you can control is your own.

### **Tip #14 Create a Spa for the Soul**

It’s wise to remember that a stepfamily has seasons of growth, joy, struggles, and excitement just like any other family. The next time a challenge arises, try what I call a Spa for the Soul. One or more of the following steps can help to ease the stress: take a deep whiff of your favorite scent, go for a walk, make an “I’m thankful for” list, read a Bible verse, or pray for someone else who is hurting. This may minimize the immediate stress of the situation.

Ask yourself: “When I look back one week, one month, one year from now, will I consider this issue/battle worth my time, stress, gray hair, and wrinkles? Will I wonder why I viewed it as such a stressful or fearful thing? Will I wish I had let it go, or will I be proud of the way I tackled the problem?”

If you desire to attend a stepmom retreat, I host several each year along with a team of stepmoms. For more information, visit [www.SisterhoodofStepmoms.com](http://www.SisterhoodofStepmoms.com).



*Lord, I need your help. I thank you that you are always available to me. You know my needs before I even speak*

*them. I never have to worry if you lack the interest or if you are too busy to hear my requests. You are for me—not against me. When stepfamily complexities attempt to overwhelm my thoughts, my emotions, and my world, teach me how to trust you. Help me to remember that there is no situation that is so intense that your peace cannot penetrate. And I humbly ask for your transforming love, grace, and mercy to permeate my home. Thank you for your faithfulness in each and every circumstance.*

Suggested Bible verses:

Psalm 42:5; Philippians 4:13; Hebrews 13:6; 1 John 5:14–15